

Homicide, Race, and Justice in the American West, 1880-1920

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should now turn his attention to finding a scholar to write the twentieth-century history of Grinnell.

Homicide, Race, and Justice in the American West, 1880–1920, by Clare V. McKanna Jr. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997. xiv, 206 pp. Illustrations, maps, graphs, tables, notes, index. \$40.00 cloth.

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For a number of years, historians have debated the extent and nature of violence in the American West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Scholars such as Robert Dykstra, finding relatively low homicide rates in Kansas cattle towns in the early 1870s, sought to debunk the popular image of the West as an especially lethal place. Others, like Roger McGrath, who looked at evidence from gold rush towns, argued that western locales were as deadly as their reputation suggested.

Clare McKanna makes a signal contribution to the debate over western violence by analyzing homicide and the provision of justice for racial minorities in Douglas County, Nebraska; Las Animas County, Colorado; and Gila County, Arizona. Perhaps the most impressive and original aspect of his exhaustive research involves the tabulation of homicide rates from coroner's inquests. McKanna correctly notes that records of coroner's juries constitute a far more comprehensive and accurate chronicle of homicides in a given county than registers of grand jury indictments. Historians' neglect of coroner's inquests has severely impeded the accuracy of their depiction of the incidence and nature of homicide. McKanna finds rates of homicide in his counties that far exceeded those in large eastern cities such as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Additionally, McKanna offers a detailed and valuable discussion of the typical circumstances of homicide (including the crucial mix of alcohol and handguns); a useful contextualization of the patterns of violence based on a "critical convergence" of ethnic and racial diversification, industrialization, and urbanization; and an innovative analysis of plea bargaining by African Americans, Apaches, and Hispanics as an index of structural disadvantages for minorities in western criminal justice systems.

The study's numerous strengths are accompanied by several weaknesses. Most importantly, these three counties cannot be considered "representative of the American West" (163). Douglas County (which included Omaha) was too urban. And although western ethnic and racial diversity has been underappreciated, Las Animas and

Gila Counties were far more diverse than most western locales. The population of Gila County, for example, included significant proportions of Hispanics, Apaches, Italians, and Anglo-American whites, and smaller numbers of African Americans and Asians. Similarly, industrialization is an important and understudied process in western history, but the pace of industrial growth in Las Animas County (the site of the infamous 1914 Ludlow Massacre) was far more intense than in most places. McKanna tabulates a much lower (if higher than expected) homicide indictment rate for Dickinson County in central Kansas. One suspects that western Iowa counties such as Cass or Shelby, and jurisdictions throughout the plains, mountain, and Pacific states would similarly yield relatively low homicide rates. Also problematic is the dilemma posed by computing homicide rates for counties with miniscule populations and then comparing them to large eastern cities. A brief spate of homicides in a rural county can produce an unnaturally elevated "rate of homicide." To his credit, McKanna seems attentive to the possibility of statistical anomalies.

Lynching is another underdeveloped topic in western history. Lynch mobs killed twenty-two persons in Iowa between 1878 and 1907, all but one of them white, usually on charges of homicide, and almost exclusively in the southern portion of the state. Despite popular and often inaccurate images of "frontier justice," scholars have barely subjected this phenomenon to rigorous analysis. In brief discussions of lynch mobs in the three counties, McKanna offers tantalizing glimpses of lynchers' motivations: racial (mob killings of African Americans), ethnic (mob murders of Italians), and extrajudicial (collective killings of whites accused of murder). These passages lack depth and context, but McKanna admirably avoids the traditional explanation that western mobs replaced an absent criminal justice system, or a more recent interpretation that dismisses western lynching as culturally and socially insignificant.

Finally, a chapter on homicide among blacks in Omaha is limited by an overreliance on the theory that southern blacks who immigrated to Omaha carried a "subculture of violence" with them. Which southern states did these African Americans migrate from? Were there cultural components to this alleged "subculture of violence" beyond an expansive sense of honor, and how did these interact with cultural, social, and economic forces in Omaha? How did black communal institutions in Omaha respond to this rampant violence? Yet the limitations of this chapter do not subtract from the significance of what McKanna tells us about the prevalence of homicide in three distinctive western counties.

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